

THE MOUNTAIN BUZZARD *BUTEO TACHARDUS* IN CENTRAL AFRICA

R.J. Dowsett & Françoise Dowsett-Lemaire

MALAWI

On 4 December 1977 we visited the eastern escarpment forests of the Nyika Plateau (Malawi), in the Kasaramba area, above Nchenachena (10°45'S., 33°59'E.). While there, we saw briefly in flight a small *Buteo* whose size, shape and colour-pattern reminded us strongly of the Mountain Buzzard *Buteo tachardus oreophilus* we had seen in Kenya a year earlier. When this bird flew into, and did not emerge from, a small patch of montane forest (at about 2320 m altitude), our suspicions were strengthened.

We returned to the area on 11 December with three ornithologists who have seen Mountain Buzzards *B. t. tachardus* in South Africa, Dr S.J. Blaber, Mrs T. Blaber and Mr D.P. Cyrus. We had excellent views of a buzzard in the same area, and on one occasion it flew over our heads, calling repeatedly. Its voice reminded us of the territorial 'mewing' call of the Common Buzzard *B. buteo* in Europe. Above a forest patch, only a few hundred metres from where seen on 4 December, it was joined by a second bird, before both were lost to view.

We are all convinced that these birds were Mountain Buzzards, apparently a pair. A few Steppe Buzzards *B. buteo vulpinus* were present on the Nyika at this time, where they frequented open country and the edge of plantations up to about 2380 m. The body and under-wing patterns of the two forms are distinctly different, and the habitat and habits (especially the calling) of the Kasaramba birds argue strongly in favour of their being Mountain Buzzards. Unfortunately we were not able to investigate further the possibility that these birds were nesting. However, a nest with eggs in November in South Africa (Courtenay-Latimer 1941) suggests that our birds could have been breeding at that time.

D.P. Cyrus was able to tape record the voice of the calling bird on 11 December, and copies of this tape are now in the possession of Mr Cyrus and ourselves. The sonograms in Fig.1 compare the warning calls of

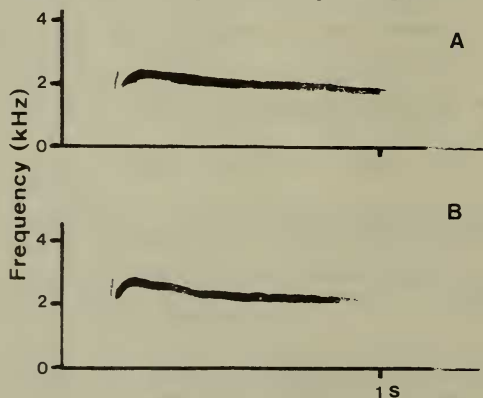


Fig.1 Warning calls of : A, Mountain Buzzard *Buteo tachardus* (Nyika, Malawi) and B, Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo* (Sweden, from Palmer & Boswell 1972)

the Nyika Mountain Buzzard and *B. buteo* of western Europe; they appear to be identical. Their similarity has been remarked on by several observers, for example Rudebeck (1956) when talking of South African populations. Rudebeck stated that *vulpinus* is silent when in South Africa, although Prof. W.R. Siegfried (*in litt.*) reports that it does call, and we heard two calling briefly together over the Chitunta Plain in north-western Zambia on 13 November 1978.

Although Benson & Benson (1977) suggested that there is unlikely to be a small resident *Buteo* in Malawi, the gap in the known distribution of the Mountain Buzzard in Central Africa has long been enigmatic, and our discovery is not entirely unexpected.

TANZANIA

Recent authors have tended to consider the Mountain Buzzard absent from northern Tanzania to Natal (Benson & Irwin 1963). However, Snow (1978a) shows a plot in Map 92 in southwestern Tanzania; he confirms (*in litt.*) that this is based on a reported specimen from Kigogo in the Uzungwa Mts (Bangs & Loveridge 1933: 153). This record has not found wide acceptance, possibly in part because it was obtained on 14 January, at a time when migrant *vulpinus* might seem more likely. At our request, Dr R.A. Paynter Jnr has kindly re-examined the specimen (which is in the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University), and he confirms (*in litt.*) that it is correctly identified as *B. tachardus* and is a male with a wing-length of 335 mm.

The Mountain Buzzard is not reported from the Usambaras in northeastern Tanzania by Sclater & Moreau (1932-33), but a December specimen from Philipshof was claimed by Friedmann (1928). This specimen is also at Harvard, and Dr Paynter (*in litt.*) confirms that it too is correctly identified as *tachardus*, being a female with a wing of 350 mm. Benson (1952) mentioned a possible specimen from Amani, but considered that its long wing pointed to it being probably *vulpinus*.

The northern population of Mountain Buzzard (the race *oreophilus*) is otherwise known on the evidence of specimens south to Kilimanjaro (Rudebeck 1956) and to Chakila in eastern Zaïre, at 3°41'S. (Prigogine 1971). In western Tanzania, along the other shore of Lake Tanganyika, there are sight records of possible Mountain Buzzards between July and September on Kungwe-Mahare (Ulfstrand & Lamprey 1960), which may well be correct in view of the specimens from the Itombwe.

SOME UNPROVEN RECORDS

A considerable gap exists between the Nyika in Malawi and the most northerly record of southern *B. t. tachardus*, which is a specimen from Zuurbbron in the Transvaal of South Africa, at about 27°20'S. (Rudebeck 1958). Some less satisfactory records have been claimed to reduce this gap. Sight records from the northern Transvaal were admitted by Siegfried (1971) and are mentioned by Snow (1978a), but were rejected by Brooke (1974). We know of no record of Mountain Buzzard in Rhodesia or Mozambique. A claimed specimen from Kasama in northern Zambia (White & Winterbottom 1949) cannot now be found in the collection of the British Museum (Nat. Hist.) Tring (C.W. Benson *in litt.*). It was accepted by the Museum at the same time as a specimen of Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus*, the sole Zambian record, which is also missing but which was identified by Benson and Capt. C.H.B. Grant. The altitude of Kasama is only 1400 m and the Mountain Buzzard is highly improbable there.

From Malawi, two specimen records of Mountain Buzzard had been claimed

prior to our Nyika sighting, although neither is accepted by Benson & Benson (1977). One from Mphunzi, reported by Benson (1944), was subsequently re-examined by both Benson (1952) and Rudebeck (1956) and found to be *vulpinus*. Similarly, a specimen from Luchenza in Cholo district (Benson 1940: 289) was considered by both authors to be *vulpinus* in all probability. This bird is in the collection at Tring, where C.W. Benson (*in litt.*) has kindly re-examined it for us. He reports that it is certainly *vulpinus*, on wing-length, although an abnormally coloured one - a view which is supported by a note on the label by G. Rudebeck made in 1969.

DISCONTINUOUS DISTRIBUTION

There appears to be no satisfactory evidence yet for the occurrence of the Mountain Buzzard between about 11° and 27°S. The most recent discussion of this discontinuous distribution is by Snow (1978b: 137-138). The situation may seem surprising in view of the close relationship between the eastern and southern African forms of *B. tachardus*, admitted by most authors, and the presence of apparently suitable habitat in the intervening areas. Such a distribution is not unique, however, and there appears to be a parallel in the absence from southern Malawi and Rhodesia of the Olive Woodpecker *Mesopicos griseocephalus*.

Snow (1978b) suggests that the distribution of Mountain Buzzards may be limited by competition with other, longer-established, buzzards. On the Nyika, the larger Augur Buzzard *B. rufofuscus* is common, and nests (*pers. obs.*) not only on cliffs, but also in forest patches where one might expect the Mountain Buzzard. However, *rufofuscus* appears to hunt exclusively over open grasslands, perhaps mainly for rodents, whereas *tachardus* has been reported feeding on chameleons, and might hunt mainly within forest. Possible competition between the two species would repay detailed field study.

The morphological differences between the northern and southern populations of Mountain Buzzard were first clarified by Rudebeck (1956), who nevertheless stressed the close similarities between the two and *vulpinus*, as have Siegfried & Frost (1971, 1973) and Winterbottom (1963). Opinion remains divided on whether to give specific or subspecific status to the various forms of Palaearctic and Ethiopian *Buteo buteo*, *sensu lato*. It has usually been considered that African breeding populations have an immediate Palaearctic origin, although Siegfried (1971) suggested an African origin for what he would consider two, now specifically distinct forms, *B. buteo* and *B. tachardus*. The nomenclatural situation has been confused by the discovery of Brooke (1974) that the description of the southern African populations apparently pre-dates the eastern African *oreophilus*, so that if the African birds are considered a single species, this long-established name would give way to *B. tachardus*.

As the differences in colour and pattern between eastern and southern African birds seem slight, it is perhaps best to continue to consider them conspecific. Unfortunately the colour illustrations of *B. tachardus* in Brown & Amadon (1968: Plate 105, Figs. 5,6) are misleading, in being far too rufous - a point brought to our attention by Dr Paynter (*in litt.*). This error has been confirmed by Drs D. Amadon and L.H. Brown (*in litt.*), but it is not now possible to determine the provenance of the specimens used for the illustrations.

While we were on the Nyika Plateau, we were unaware of the differences in plumage between *B. t. tachardus* and *B. t. oreophilus*, and we cannot

say to which form our sightings refer. On geographical grounds we would expect *oreophilus*. The Nyika is within the Tanganyika-Nyasa montane group, which is geographically and perhaps faunistically more closely related to montane forests to the north than to those of the southeastern group (Dowsett 1971). The nyika birds were found in the high altitude forests typical of *oreophilus*, whereas the nominate race is of necessity a bird largely of low coastal forest.

The apparent absence now of the Mountain Buzzard from Rhodesia and Mozambique may suggest that the two forms have been separated for some time, although Rudebeck (1956: 425) did suggest that one specimen from Natal showed some approach to *oreophilus*. Liversidge (1959) said that Mountain Buzzards had been shot out of this intervening area, but we agree with Benson & White (1960) that this is improbable. The belated discovery of the Mountain Buzzard in Malawi is doubtless a reflection of its isolated habitat and retiring behaviour - when not uttering its display call, it can be overlooked by the unwary. The possibility remains that the discontinuous distribution of the Mountain Buzzard is more apparent than real, and that further populations will be found in Central Africa.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Dr S.J.M. Blaber, Mrs T. Blaber and Mr D.P. Cyrus for their assistance in the field. We are grateful to Dr R.A. Paynter Jnr for re-examining Loveridge's specimens, and to Drs D. Amadon and L.H. Brown and Messrs R.K. Brooke, D.H. Day and M.P. Stuart Irwin for answering our questions. Prof J.-C. Ruwet of the University of Liège has generously provided facilities for sonographic analyses. Mr C.W. Benson, Prof W.R. Siegfried and Dr D.W. Snow have kindly commented on a draft of this note.

REFERENCES

- BANGS, O. & LOVERIDGE, A. Reports on the scientific results of an expedition to the southwestern highlands of Tanganyika Territory: 3, Birds. *Bulletin of the Museum of Comparative Zoology (Harvard)* 75 (3): 143-221.
- BENSON, C.W. 1940. Further notes on Nyasaland birds (with particular reference to those of the Northern Province). *Ibis* 14 ser., vol.4: 257-298.
- 1944. Notes from Nyasaland. *Ibis* 86: 445-480.
- 1952. Notes from Nyasaland. *Ostrich* 23: 144-159.
- & BENSON, F.M. 1977. *The birds of Malawi*. Limbe: Montfort Press.
- & IRWIN, M.P.S. 1963. Some comments on the "Atlas of European Birds" from the Ethiopian aspect. *Ardea* 51: 212-229.
- & WHITE, C.M.N. 1960. Discontinuous distribution (Aves). *Proceedings of the First Federal Science Congress, Salisbury* 195-216.
- BROOKE, R.K. 1974. *Buteo tachardus* Andrew Smith 1830. *Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club* 94: 59-62.
- BROWN, L. & AMADON, D. 1968. *Eagles, hawks and falcons of the world*. Feltham: Hamlyn for Country Life Books.
- COURTENAY-LATIMER, M. 1941. Breeding of the Mountain Buzzard (*Buteo ore-*

- ophilus, Hartert and Neuman (sic). *Ostrich* 12: 20-23
- DOWSETT, R.J. 1971. The avifauna of the Makutu Plateau. *Revue Zoologique et Botanique Africaine* 84: 312-333.
- FRIEDMANN, H. 1928. A collection of birds from the Uluguru and the Usambara Mountains, Tanganyika Territory. *Ibis* 12 ser., vol.4: 74-99.
- LIVERSIDGE, R. 1959. Tropical mountain birds south of the Zambezi. *Ostrich* Supp. 3: 68-78.
- PALMER, S. & BOSWALL, J. (Eds.). 1972. *The Peterson field guide to the bird songs of Britain and Europe*. 30 cm LP stereo disc, RFLP 5002. Stockholm: Sveriges Radio Förlag.
- PRIGOGINE, A. 1971. Les oiseaux de l'Itombwe et de son hinterland. Vol.1. *Ann. Mus. Roy. de l'Afrique Cent., Sci. Zool.* 185: 298 pp.
- RUDEBECK, G. 1956. *Buteo buteo trizonatus*, a new Buzzard from the Union of South Africa. *South African Animal Life* 4: 415-437.
- 1958. Some additional notes on the buzzard, *Buteo buteo trizonatus*. *Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club* 78: 54-56.
- SCLATER, W.L. & MOREAU, R.E. 1932-33. Taxonomic and field notes on some birds of north-eastern Tanganyika Territory. *Ibis* 13 ser., vol.2: 487-522, 656-683; vol.3: 1-33, 187-219, 399-440.
- SIEGFRIED, W.R. 1971. Affinities of the small African and palaearctic Buteos. *Ostrich* supp. 8:41-46.
- & FROST, P.G.H. 1971. Indeterminate Buteo breeding in the south-western Cape. *Ostrich* 42: 73-74.
- 1973. Systematic notes on the small African Buteos. *Ardea* 61: 123-127.
- SNOW, D.W. 1978a. *Buteo tachardus* species-group, in: Snow, D.W. (Ed.) *An atlas of speciation in African Non-Passerine birds*. London: British Museum (Nat. Hist.).
- 1978b. Relationships between the European and African avifaunas. *Bird Study* 25: 134-148.
- ULFSTRAND, S. & LAMPREY, H. 1960. On the birds of the Kungwe-Mahari area in western Tanganyika Territory. *Journal of the East Africa Natural History Society* 23: 223-232.
- WHITE, C.M.N. & WINTERBOTTOM, J.M. 1949. *A check list of the birds of Northern Rhodesia*. Lusaka: Government Printer.
- WINTERBOTTOM, J.M. 1963. Systematic notes on birds of the Cape Province. 22. *Buteo buteo* (L.). *Ostrich* 34: 165-166.
- R.J. Dowsett and Françoise Dowsett-Lemaire, Livingstone Museum, Box 498, Livingstone, Zambia.

(Received 6 February 1979)